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CONTEMPORARY COLLAGRAPHIC ART

By

J. Darrell Johnson

B.S., Eastern Montana State College, 1967

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

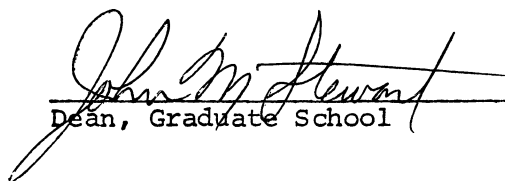
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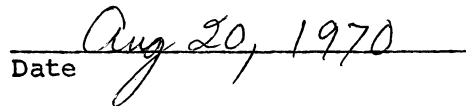
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INTRODUCTION

The history of modern graphic art began in those years after the middle of the nineteenth century when people first considered how the print could be raised to an independent art form. In a period like ours, which takes the independence of graphic creation entirely for granted, it is hard to understand these deliverations. In those days, however, making prints was considered largely as a "sub-artistic" activity. This attitude was, surprisingly, existing during the time when people everywhere were speculating anxiously on the nature of visual arts, on their currently appropriate function and importance in everyday life.

There was a growing feeling that a fresh start would have to be made, and people reflected on every aspect of artistic expression. They regarded art as something bound up with life, as an intensification of existence, or saw its true source in free phantasy.

Ceaseless and often violent change is one of the characteristics of our time. Change is always magnified in art by the search for individual expression. Shifting historical styles and contradictory theories may cause artists to wonder if there are any reliable standards in art. In general terms, there is a major contrast between the concepts

of the past and those of the present. One direction of the modern period is based on the claim that it is the artist's feelings that count, his emotion in the presence of the object, not the object itself.

The following presentation is an attempt to stress the importance of graphic arts, contemporary concepts, and the collagraphic process as a means of development for the contemporary artist.

DISCOVERING THE COLLAGRAPH

Inventions and discoveries often come about by accident. This may be said about the development and birth of the collagraph. Its discovery took place at the University of Washington in Seattle in the fall of 1956 when Professor Glen Alps asked his printmaking students to investigate the various printing qualities of surfaces such as leaves, string, and assorted papers. The tentative plan was to work in collage (cut paper, string, etc. pasted together to form a design) and then to proceed to other processes. The class was asked to develop a collage on a stiff surface such as a piece of wood with the intention of inking it and printing it as a woodcut. The students became anxious and enthusiastic in experimenting with their individual plates. Some of the students tested them by laying a sheet of paper on the plate and rolling an inked roller over the paper. Whenever there was a raised surface, the ink was left on the paper. This is, of course, a very simple process, but one which has never been done before with collages. With more experimentation, the class learned that a variety of effects could be achieved by varying the pressure of the roller.

The collagraph is a printmaking process in which proofs are pulled from a block similar to that used in Relief Block Printing, i.e., a block on which the design of

pattern is built up in the manner of a collage, thence the name collagraph. As in relief block printing, a great variety of objects may be adhered to the block, and if they are likely to be affected by the printing fluid, they are treated with a coating. The surface of the collagraph block is inked, wiped to leave ink only in the depressions, and then the block is printed in an etching press. The technique has many variations for creating interesting effects of tones and textures, seemingly one of its most distinct technical advantages. Sometimes etched or photoengraved plates are made an element of the composition. When constructed to a relatively level surface, with firm materials, a collagraph block may also be used to make embossed prints. Dampened paper is placed over the block and the two are run through the press. Such a block may be wholly or partially inked; it creates embossed areas similar to the effects of blind printing. Thusly, the collagraph offers an abundant variety of technical approaches to create a final statement.

There is undoubtedly evidence of an earlier experimentation with synthetic plates. However, the most unquestionable part of the long-awaited discovery was the appearance of the term collagraph, and the recognition of it as a highly expressive and competitive medium. As is the case with any innovation, it has met its share of resistance from traditional printmakers, particularly from etchers and

engravers. The rather generous appearance of the term in leading exhibition catalogues is at least a measure of its acceptance and merit.

THE PROCESS

The total collagraphic process involves much forethought, and also exhausting laborious involvement. First of all, the plate has to be pre-examined. The artist must understand his concepts or visions that he wants to appear in his final prints. Since the collagraph is a textured plate that produces various shades and various textural prints, the artist must learn to achieve desired effects with the materials available to him.

The most successful and rewarding process in developing a collagraph plate is through experimenting. Materials are practically limitless, and techniques vary in application from artist to artist. Failure as well as success is important in the development of any artist. Being able to see his own mistakes and achievements is of utmost importance.

The basic principle of the collagraphic plate is how to use various surface textures in obtaining variety in the prints. Rough textures, such as sandpaper, ground walnut shell, velour paper, sawdust, sand, etc. may be used in areas where the very darkest of darks are desired. Lighter areas can be achieved by using such materials as white glue, lacquer, varnish, or smooth-surfaced paper or metal sheets.

These examples are only a few techniques which are possible. Never follow material samples in achieving concepts without first experimenting with sample prints. Discover your own textures for your own personal use.

The numerous variety of materials, which for the most part are extremely available and inexpensive, tend to be primary assets of the collagrapher. The printmaker need not assume the use of any single materials, for example, wood or linoleum, any more than a painter assumes a limit to his concepts entirely in terms of oil paint. Since Braque and Picasso first employed collage, approximately 1915, combining paint with sand, wallpaper, or pieces of string, artists everywhere have constantly attempted to widen their means of expression to include all possible materials and all possible techniques. This has not been a strictly willful adventure on their part, but has served a philosophic intention affecting the whole basis of present aesthetic judgment.

The printmaker, too, has recently grown more suspicious of fixed assumptions with regard to methods and materials. He has become open to experience. Like the painter or sculptor, he values freedom of choice. New and different tools, different ways to work, and various materials are constantly being tried. He has grown more flexible and resourceful in answering the question: "Which of these will give my image its clearest, most potent expression?"

Materials, within themselves, may be interpreted as a possible advance toward the enhancement of the collagraphic techniques. However, we must also anticipate possible abuse. In using "found" objects and "wild" materials, an obvious danger exists. The vigor of texture, the force and density of these discovered fragments may tempt the artist to use them for their own sake. Without conviction, their use in the printmaker's studio may well lead to a new form of romanticism, a sort of nature-whimsy, that has often proved the weakness typical of a narrow regional art. Without the power to absorb images taken from such objects-- to absorb them securely in the natural flow of vision-- the use of found materials can only be a danger. They must be ingested and transmuted in terms of the imagination; otherwise they become useless ballast, dragging down the flight of the artist's ideas.

In building a relief-collagraphic plate, the techniques are entirely the individual's choice. Limitations are rare, although materials will at time anchor themselves to only a few possibilities. The plate can be either built up with found materials or liquid hardeners, or it may be carved away with incised lines, diggings, scrapings, etc. There is often some point during the creation of a collagraph when one wishes to make alterations to the image. A distinct advantage of the collagraph is the possibility of making changes at any time during the process. Certain

changes require certain procedures: plates should be given an opportunity to dry before applying another liquid texture; lacquer or other hard coatings should also be applied as an overcoat and given time to dry. The plate's printing abilities are so sensitive that the slightest mark will register on the final print. One such example is that one layer of lacquer will print differently than two coats, and several coats will also vary the appearance of the print. The foundation plate may be made from a variety of materials such as masonite, plywood, metal sheeting, and heavy cardboard, which also makes a fine plate. Through experimentation, one will discover that certain plates will withstand the rigors they are subjected to longer than others.

Inking a plate can also be a rewarding venture. The basic method for inking is the Intaglio process--rubbing ink into the plate's cracks and crevices, then wiping all of the excess ink away. The wiping of the plate can be very hard work, but should be done methodically to achieve the utmost quality in print reproduction. Using a rolled-up rag, the artist gently strokes the plate, starting at one edge. He wipes the plate in one direction, then turns the plate and wipes crosswise. The plate is turned in a constant 90 degree rotational pattern, the process is repeated until the plate is clear of excess ink. Experience will be one's only guide as to how much wiping the plates will require.

Generally, thinning inks with oil or turps leaves the paint with a dull or even transparent surface finish.

As far as other inking techniques are concerned, a listing of processes would only defeat the collagraph's intent. As stated previously, the collagraph is an experimental medium. The complete process, from the original conception to the complete printed image, is a unique experience. This is what today's artists want, and this is the opportunity which the collagraph offers.

GENERALIZATION

Until recently the materials used for relief-printing were severely limited. Wood, linoleum, and sometimes metal were those in general use. Normally prints were taken from rectangular blocks of smooth surfaces; their straight-cut edges were always the respected boundary of the image. But at the present time, apart from blocks the artist carves himself, he is likely to assume a much wider, more varied range of materials. He can get images from almost any flat object or surface which can be covered with lacquer and is tough enough to withstand the necessary pressure of printing; a face of eroded stone, a section cut through a tree, a fragment of tortured metal found on the beach. Printing blocks have been made from old shingles torn from a roof, from weathered plywood, from the stamped metal lids of fruit cans, and from machine parts found on the garage floor. Even soft materials can be used: a piece of embroidery, crumpled paper, or the rippling surface of a nylon stocking. One needs only to saturate soft materials with a liquid hardener (such as lacquer) and spread them out on a hard backing.

In recent years printmaking has reached a turning point in its development. Along with other activities, radical change is taking shape and new streams of vitality

are finding their way into the print studios. Artists are exploring untried ways of expression, and some entirely novel sources of both imagery and printing materials have been uncovered, while fresh approaches to the practical job of printing have gone along with these discoveries. In most art schools printmaking is taking on a new air of authority, offering as it does remarkable scope for both expression and research. Some of the studies that are already making useful bridges between printmaking and other activities are exploration in color, movement, optical effects, and basic design.

Many artists are searching for a more complex printing system and a freer approach to materials. There are occasions, however, when the discipline imposed on the artist by his materials turns out to be an additional source of strength and richness.

The collagraph is a contemporary intaglio printmaking process that has become quite popular with many artists today who have been searching for such an outlet. Unfortunately, the public is only too apt to tie the creative artist down to a single, narrow, and rigid formula. It is a temptation to categorize an artist and his work for the sake of mere convenience and rather superficial sense of finality. This is practically an impossibility with the collagraphic process since it is in a sense a technique-less medium. When dealing with techniques, the search for images

through discoveries is the process itself. From the beginning, as now, the techniques have grown in a very personal manner, suiting the needs of the individual printmaker. Had the techniques or discoveries been catalogues through the years, the purpose of the collagraph would have been defeated. As Mr. Donald Bunse, graphic instructor at the University of Montana, states, "I feel that it is a medium that is more involved in 'why to' than 'how to.'"

The true lover of printmaking is one who worships the hidden life of his captured world, the movement of each stationary line and the constant interplay of lights and shadows. For the specialist, all that counts is his craft. A man may know precisely how to use his tools, and how to ink his plate, and how to pull a proof, and still have nothing to say.

All that is good in a printmaker's work comes from the knowledge he has gained outside the practice. It comes from his knowledge of the fundamental laws that transcend this or that specific skill and that artists have gradually come to understand through their painting, sculpting, or drawing. Once the artist has developed skills in the processes and manipulations of tools, he has at least started his complete development as a printmaker. We should not be so rash and hasty in judging his present work in a once-and-for-all decision. Artists are as capable of improving themselves as any apprentice in any field of work. Perhaps some

of the best advice for the potential printmaker-artist is to move away from the original methods, experiment in several directions, and continue endless practice.

The essence of engraving resides in lines, how and why they are placed; but the life-blood of the collagraph is in the ink which joins the incised lines, the textured material, and the raised surfaces of the plate in a sometimes rather mysterious marriage with the paper. The collagrapher realizes it is the union of ink and paper wherein the peculiar beauty of art lies.

What distinguishes the artist-printmaker is that the choice of wood, copper, stone, or found materials provides him, so to speak, with his inspiration; or, more accurately, the discipline imposed on him by his materials turns into an additional source of strength and richness. Just as, to the true poet, rhyme and meter are a stimulus and not a hindrance, so in some mysterious way the artist's material is a help and inspiration for him.

The collagraphic process is a technique which is probably best explained through visual understanding. A concept is self-explanatory in substance, satisfaction, knowledge, harmony, communication, and expression. Print-making itself is usually not accepted in consciousness as an infinite idea of expression. When the aesthetic power and expressive significance of prints are seen and felt, only then will they be understood.

An artist, during the course of his life, ideally

experiences stylistic changes due to the development of aesthetic values. He will be confronted with questions concerning development of his work, and will search for ways to find concepts, manners to develop a creative attitude, ways to obtain inspiration, and methods to capture individuality and originality. As he is searching for these (techniques), he is not feeling the essence of pre-occupation with the infinite power of aesthetic wholeness. At the instant of acknowledgment, oneness will always be found.

No one has a patent-right to ideas. They are available to anyone caring to exploit them. They have existed, and always will exist. As in music, various tones have existed since the beginning of time. However, composers can rearrange them in a conscious manner, and arrive at a unique combination of ideas. An artist can visually attain effects by rearranging methods and materials into a whole new concept. New combinations of ideas are always possible, if the artist doesn't impose limitations upon his own creative abilities.

Every print creates some new insight into the medium; every new overprinting of color must be stored in the mind for future use. Each print is a new experience which may extend the frontiers of the medium. The artist is sometimes surprised at the result of his endeavors; occasionally something happens that he hadn't anticipated, and the

excitement derives makes the collagraph an ideal printing medium for a painter. The collagraph helps to clarify ideas in painting and, of course, painting helps in the conception of the collagraph, as well as other mediums.

Collagraphy is a process capable of great refinement and subtlety, and of rich exuberance of color; it is capable of rendering large and powerful images, of delicate draftsmanship, of a wide and exciting range of textures--the possibilities are virtually unlimited. However, in order to exploit the medium to its potential, one must understand and adapt himself to techniques. A collagraph is the result of a fine balance between the designer and the printer, who are in essence the same artist.

A collagraphic artist has to be aware of the quality of his prints, and he must have a sensitivity to the craft itself. It is the means whereby he realizes his ideas; he must also be aware that the medium itself will have a hand in shaping the product.

A good guide for the serious creative printmaker to follow is the general requirements for turning an original print into a work of graphic art:

1. The artist alone has made the image in or upon the plate, stone, wood block, or other material for the purpose of creating a work of graphic art.
2. The impression is made directly from that original material by the artist or pursuant to his directions.

3. The finished print is approved by the artist.¹

¹Carl Zigrosser, Prints, Thirteen Illustrated Essays on the Art of the Print (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1962), p. 108.

SUMMARY

As our contemporary world changes, the artist is challenged to find new ways to meet change. Wider horizons and new concepts mean new approaches are necessary.

Today the printmaker is more conscious of execution and the personal touch as a standard of value for the print. The artist who now makes prints speaks not as a copyist, but as a creative artist working directly in a graphic medium. The modern print defies translation in words, since it speaks in its own aesthetic language.

Like painting or sculpture, printmaking should mean an exposure to new experiences, a change of expansion into a world without frontiers. Printmaking should never signify a contradiction, a closing down, an involvement with narrow technical problems.²

Art in every form is playing a more important part in the culture of our contemporary civilization. It is a challenge to pass emphasis on materialistic values. The original print is one of the most democratic or current arts forms because it is within the financial reach of every individual.

²Michael Rothenstein, Frontiers of Printmaking (New York: Reinhold Publishing Corp., 1966), p. 13.

To create then is to invest, a moment, a place, or a thing with the rank of one's uniqueness, to say it in your own way. Being creative means to discover or invent something new, a new organization of things, a new basis for thinking, a new insight into art or a way of living, even only a new expectation. It doesn't have to be new to the world, but new to the person.³

³Victor D'Amico, "What Is Creative Teaching," School Arts Magazine, January 1955, p. 4.

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The Silent Majority, collagraph, 1970



The Silent Majority, collagraph and oils on canvas, 1970



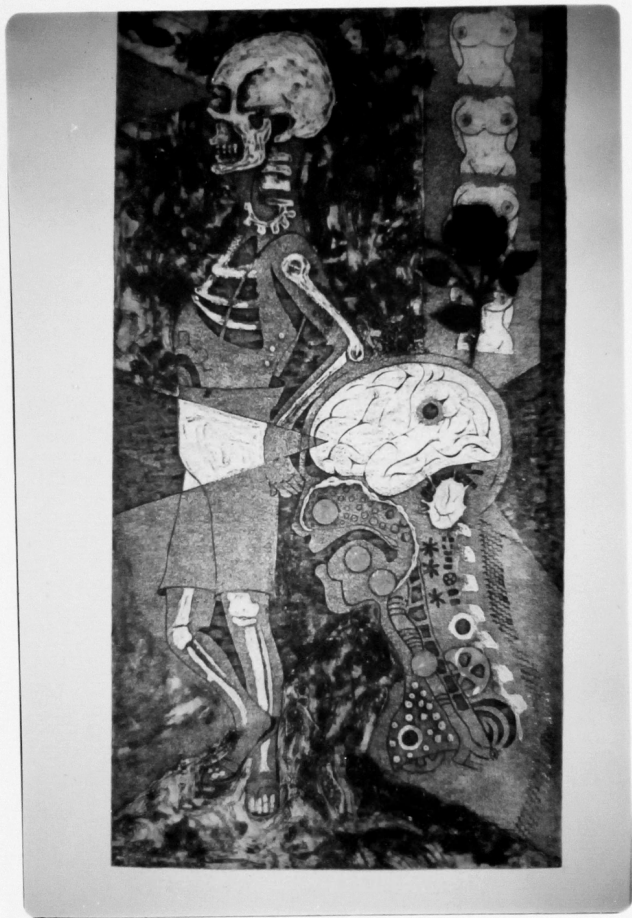
Integration, collagraph and stencil, 1969



Tribute to Toulouse-Lautrec, collagraph, 1970



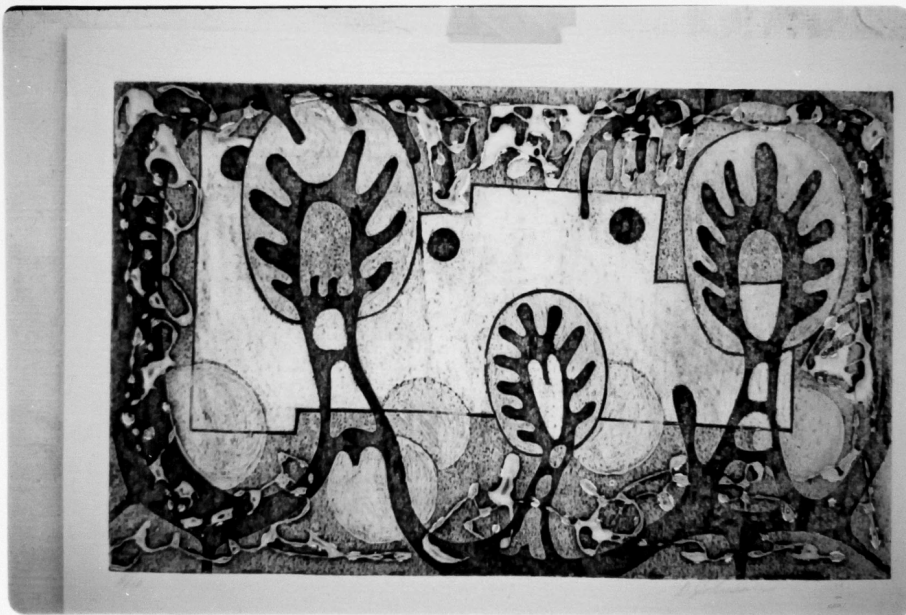
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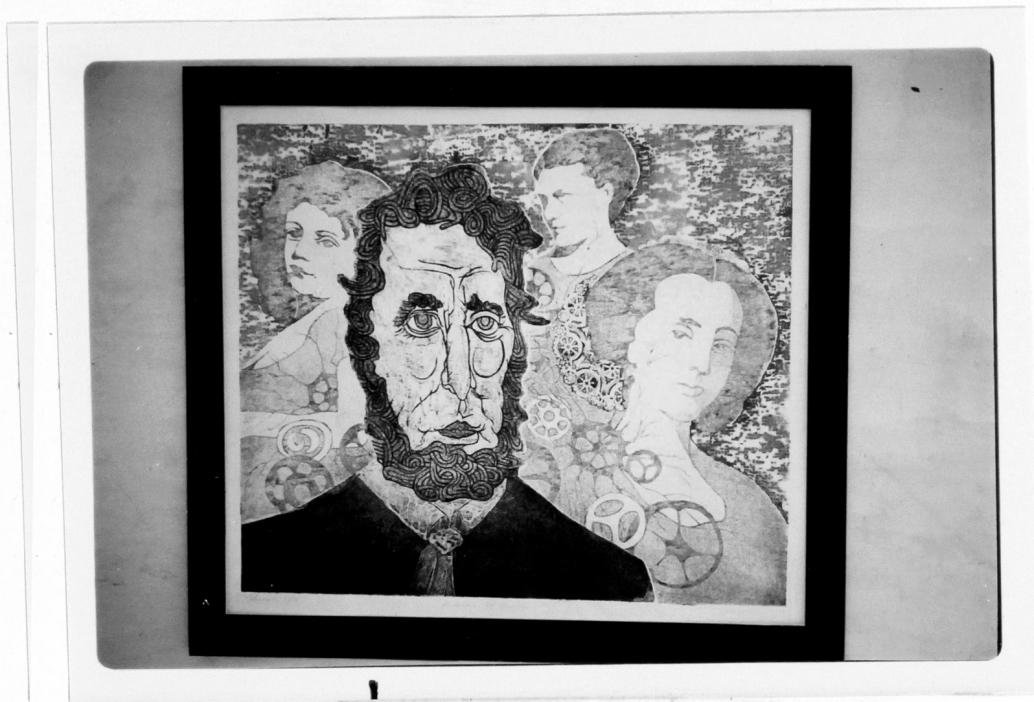
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